

Intro: Mgr William Steele at the ACTA diocesan conference in January 2014 gave this talk on how dialogue must be inspired by an appreciation of a theology and spirituality which arise from Scriptural roots and the whole story of our redemption.

A PRAYERFUL REFLECTION ON DIALOGUE

Meditation on Dialogue and Communion by Rev Mgr William Steele

ACTA Leeds Open Meeting, Leeds Trinity University, 18 January 2014

When I was living at St Mary's, Bradford some 20 years ago, I kept my car in a garage rented from the Council, one of a row of six. One day I went to get my car, & there was a gang of 10-11 year-olds rampaging around on the roofs of these garages. I looked up at one of them and said he was in very serious danger of breaking his neck.

I'd have forgotten this little incident ages ago, if it hadn't been for his reaction. Or rather, lack of it. No abuse, nothing. All he did was look at me. And that's what I remember: that look. Sheer, blank emptiness. I looked into his eyes – and there was nothing there, as though behind his eyes there was no soul. It was eerie. Had no one ever spoken a word of love, of care, to this boy – recognised him as someone? A person? Had no one ever really listened to him – had any kind of genuine dialogue with him?

Anyway, I'm afraid I acted rather like the priest in the parable. I passed by that wounded brother on the other side, and drove off.

Dialogue: speaking honestly, and listening humbly. Dialogue is as vital to our humanity as the air we breathe.

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Real dialogue - dialogue worth the name - begins when I express myself to you as truly and sincerely as I can. I hand over my true opinions, my true feelings, my honest beliefs. In doing this I take quite a risk. I take the risk of revealing to you something of my true self. I 'hand myself over into foreign territory', so to speak: the world of another person. But of course, if the dialogue is to be real, you then must truly listen. You must put aside for the moment your feelings, your opinions, your beliefs as you try to receive that little bit of me I risked showed you when I spoke. That is true listening, that humbly 'putting aside' of part of myself, that letting go of part of my territory, and in hospitality letting you occupy it.

What is so often forgotten, and where we fail even more often, is that 'humble listening' is not at all the same as 'agreeing with'. Listening is about understanding: It's about understanding with the mind, obviously - but still more it's about understanding with the heart, the 'listening heart'.

It is only when both have listened like this that they can each receive and welcome the real other person, not a construct of their own imagination. Only after this can differences be discussed on the basis of reality, not prejudice.

What I've just said applies in a particular way to the relationship we often (and misleadingly) call 'spiritual direction'; better names are 'spiritual friendship', or 'walking beside' - I have had the privilege of being a 'spiritual director' many times, over many years. But the same principles (of honesty and humility) apply in their own particular (and very different) ways to other relationships too - e.g. to lovers, to teacher & student,

doctor/patient etc. or in group relationships such as inter-faith dialogue, or groupings in the institutional Church: e.g. laity/clergy, College of Bishops/Holy See.

The point is, whatever form dialogue takes, it is very demanding. It costs. And it is never perfect, because however close we are to another person we are still mysteries to one another. That is the glory of our uniqueness, and the joy of love and friendship. We cannot, nor should we want to, totally possess another person, conquer their 'holy ground'.

There is, of course, that mutual 'indwelling' of people who truly love each other, expressed in the poem by the Elizabethan poet, Philip Sidney:

*My true love hath my heart and I have his,
By just exchange one for another given...*

But there's a world of difference between conquest, which is abuse, and the 'just exchange' and mutual wonder which is love and listening.

So there is an asceticism about real dialogue, a 'letting go'. – the 'letting-go' involved in the risk of sincere speaking, and in the 'letting go' of one's own ideas in genuine listening. In fact, true dialogue demands a spiritual 'self-emptying'

And that brings us to Jesus Christ, who 'emptied himself', taking the form of a servant'.

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In the two Creation myths at the beginning of Genesis – myths indeed, but myths that are the vehicles of the word and revelation of God - God doesn't just impersonally make human beings, God addresses them. He gives them tasks, gives them choices – *Fill the earth and subdue it...You may eat of every other tree in the garden, but of the tree of knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for on the day you eat it you shall die* (Gen.1:28; 2:1617). It's as though God were saying, 'Yes, maybe you have arrived after millions of years via chimpanzees, the australopithecus or whatever, by a process of natural selection by survival of the fittest; but now I am creating you as persons by calling forth your freedom, drawing forth your power to say YES or NO, to me and to one another.'

The dialogue of Creation: the YES of love, calling forth a YES in reply.

We are created as persons by that dialogue, and we are created for dialogue, because we are created for communion, and dialogue is the very life-blood of communion. (Hence the sad situation of the boy on the garage roof.)

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Whatever our beginnings were in the long tale of evolution, the story the Word of God in Scripture tells, is a story of God's endless creative calling, and constant human frailty: the mix and the muddle of our 'Yes' and our 'No'. It's the story of our glorious achievements, and the tragedy of their misuse. It's the story of the covenants, the promises, the warnings of our faithful God. The poet Francis Thompson called God the 'Hound of Heaven' in endless pursuit of the beloved quarry:

*I fled him down the nights and down the days
I fled him down the arches of the years*

- and then: *All things betray thee, who betrayest me.*

In the fullness of time, there came the unravelling of the plot: *The Word was made flesh.* The Creator's YES to us is made flesh - in the human voice of a Child in the manger, an Apprentice in the workshop, a Preacher on the hillside, a Man on a cross. The Creator's YES to us. *Come to me, all you who labour.* The Hound of Heaven.

But Jesus was not only the Hound; he was the Quarry as well. In Jesus the quarry stops his flight and at last gives back an unconditional YES: *Abba, Father, remove this cup from me, yet not what I want but what you want....*(Mk.14:36).

That word *Abba* – you still hear that word in the few Aramaic-speaking parts of Syria, spoken by little children to their father. A word of intimacy, a word of familiarity and love. In that intimate cry of Jesus in the Garden to the One he called *Abba*, there is the faintest echo of an eternal dialogue, an eternal YES in the loving unity of the one God. Not a unity of arithmetic but a unity of love and communion.

It seems that the Roman custom at that time was to crucify women with a loin cloth round the waist; but a man was crucified totally naked – totally exposed and revealed, vulnerable to the insults and obscenities from those who passed by. So the one God who is dialogue, the One who is Trinity, Father and Son in the Communion of the Holy Spirit, reveals the mystery of the Godhead in the butchering and humiliation of that totally revealed and naked Man on the Cross.

God revealed himself to Moses from the Burning Bush – a true revelation; yet in so doing he revealed himself as - mystery: I AM WHO I AM. Here, from the Cross, God is revealing himself even more fully, taking a far greater 'risk' if you like. Yet how impenetrable is the mystery that is now revealed so generously! 'This is what it is to be God', he says, as he reveals himself, and triumphantly and victoriously affirms himself, by means of that obscene shambles. Indeed,

God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength. (I Cor.1:25)

- or as the old Passiontide hymn, the *Vexilla Regis*, puts it, *Regnavit a ligno Deus*, 'God was reigning from the tree'.

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The whole Church, from the individual to the world-wide institution, is called to be the Sign and the Channel – the 'Sacrament' in other words – of the Christ who on the Cross revealed what it is to be God: the God who is dialogue, the God who is Communion. The Church evangelises by being this sacrament. The Church is not an autocracy modelled on the Roman Empire, nor is it a democracy modelled on constitutional democracies of today. The Church is a mystery of communion, and the oxygen of communion is dialogue.

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with us all. Amen.

